



Are you ready if the H1N1 virus comes back?

Last spring, history came calling in the form of a rare spring-time outbreak of a flu virus – a novel combination of swine, bird and human viruses.

Fortunately, the outbreak was relatively mild, claiming just 436 lives in the first four months – nowhere near the 150 victims a day killed during a normal flu season. The problem with the spring outbreak was not the numbers affected but the fact that it was a novel strain and had arrived in what is normally not flu season. Health officials worry that the new H1N1 strain has mutated over the summer into a far more potent strain, ready to emerge this fall with more deadly results.

That's what happened in 1918, when an H1N1 virus appeared in a relatively mild form early in the year only to re-emerge with catastrophic consequences a few months later. Estimated deaths worldwide from the so-called Spanish flu (it actually most likely began in the U.S.) range from 21 million to as high as 100 million. And like the 1918 virus, the new H1N1 strain does not disproportionately target the elderly and the young, but instead often fells those much younger and healthier – schoolchildren ages 5 to 18 and pregnant women. Vaccine manufacturers were asked to produce a vaccine for this strain, and if all goes smoothly, vaccines should be available by mid-October through the normal channels of distribution. For the latest information, check the DSHS official website: www.texasflu.org.

www.TexasFlu.org

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended certain groups be vaccinated first:

- Pregnant women
- Household contacts and caregivers for children younger than 6 months of age
- Health care and emergency medical services personnel
- All people from 6 months through 24 years of age
- Persons aged 25 through 64 years who have chronic medical conditions

DSHS has been working on flu response for months, first for the outbreak in April and May and now to prepare for a possible re-emergence this fall. In the spring outbreak, DSHS stood up our emergency operations center, staffed a hotline and tested tens of thousands of flu samples in our laboratories. Staff worked through the summer reviewing the spring response to see how it could be improved, revising work plans and coordinating statewide conferences on flu preparations. The Office of EMS/Trauma Systems Coordination does not anticipate having to mobilize ambulances for flu response as we do during a hurricane event. However, a flu outbreak is a new breed of response, and we simply don't know at this point what we are going to need. We will try to keep you linked to the most up-to-date flu information, and we'll be here to answer any questions you have. For now, we've pulled together a list of resources to help you get start preparing.



The most important thing for EMS to remember is the first rule of response – rescuer safety first. Texas can't respond to a health crisis if large numbers of its caregivers fall ill. DSHS is encouraging people – especially those in a high risk group like EMS personnel – to get the vaccine as soon as it's available.

“Health care personnel – and especially EMS and fire personnel – are on the front lines when it comes to flu response,” says State EMS Director Maxie Bishop. “It's vitally important that they keep themselves healthy and ready to respond if the flu comes knocking at Texas' door.” – Kelly Harrell

Why is this flu different?

H1N1 viruses have been around for decades. But while most flu viruses have two genetic elements, this strain of H1N1 has four: two types of swine flu, a bird flu and human flu genes. According to the CDC, this particular strain has never been seen in the U.S. Currently, officials think the H1N1 vaccine will require two doses, 28 days apart, and are urging health care professionals to get vaccinated.

On the call

What should call center personnel tell EMS crews en route? How close to a patient should you get during an assessment? Do you notify the receiving facility? These and other questions are answered in the CDC interim guidance for EMS and 9-1-1 call centers for managing patients with suspected flu: www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance_ems.htm.

Keep yourselves safe — and keep your patients safe — by cleaning your units and your PPE after each call. The CDC has issued guidance for cleaning EMS vehicles during a pandemic: www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/healthcare/cleaning_ems.html.

It might be prudent to use face masks and respirators during contact with patients suspected of influenza-like illness (ILI). The CDC has released recommendations for face mask and respirator use to reduce the spread of the flu virus: www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/masks.htm.



Q: Will getting a seasonal flu shot protect me against the H1N1 flu?

A: The CDC is advising people, especially those in high risk groups (see box on previous page) to get **both** the seasonal and the H1N1 vaccinations if possible. The seasonal flu vaccine is expected to be available first, with the H1N1 vaccine scheduled to follow in October. The seasonal flu requires one dose; current information suggests the H1N1 vaccine will require two doses administered 28 days apart. Once the vaccine is available, people can find locations for vaccinations by calling 2-1-1 or at www.texasflu.org. Health officials suggest getting all the vaccines as soon as they are available.

EMS administration

The International Association of Fire Chiefs has released two position statements on pandemic flu at www.iaemsc.org

Resources for H1N1 information

DSHS – the latest flu info for Texas

www.texasflu.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.flu.gov

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu

Interim guidance for cleaning EMS transport vehicles during flu pandemic

www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/healthcare/cleaning_ems.html

Interim recommendation for face mask and respirator use

www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/masks.htm

Weekly flu activity updates from CDC

www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/update.htm

Compilation of news about H1N1 from [ems1.com](http://www.ems1.com)

www.ems1.com/special-reports/484330-Swine-flu-outbreak-raises-public-health-concern-for-world-officials

Prevention

Flu viruses travel from person to person through respiratory droplets of coughs and sneezes. The droplets may land on another person or may land on something a person touches. If he then touches his mouth before washing his hands, infection could follow. And a person can be infected and contagious for a day before he comes down with symptoms.

In addition to cleaning equipment, you can help stop the spread of viruses by washing your hands frequently — even if you've been wearing gloves. Use hand sanitizers if you have them.



CDC video on hand washing:

www.cdc.gov/cdctv/handstogether

CDC downloadable hand washing poster:

www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/pdf/handwashing.pdf

The H1N1 vaccine should be available this fall. DSHS will keep updated vaccine information on its website www.texasflu.org.